Chapter Four

Six-thirty on a rainy Saturday morning, and Lisa DiNardo's shiny yellow safari jacket made her stick out like a daffodil on an ash heap. She was just as tired as the other women waiting for the monthly bus from Bridgeport to the correctional facility in Niantic, but she'd be damned if she'd broadcast "hopeless" like their sorry blue windbreakers did.

But as soon as she boarded the bus, she sensed the other women—there were only two men—mentally rolling their eyes—that white bitch thinks she's going to some sort of fashion show. Lisa sat beside a woman who settled into a nap as soon as the bus got onto 95. Every time Lisa moved, her jacket squished, and the woman stirred, letting Lisa know she was getting good and pissed. So, Lisa took the jacket off, stowed it in the rack above her seat and froze the rest of the way up the Connecticut coast.

As soon as the bus pulled up to the prison, she put it on again, and the guards let her wear it even after taking her handbag and wanding her.

"Not too Yellow Duckie?" Lisa asked her daughter from the other side of the gray metal table. Teri folded her arms across her chest. "Mom . . . it's just a jacket, hardly a major fashion statement. Nino give it to you?"

"Nino? Come on. You always think there's something going on between the two of us, and I keep telling you there isn't." She shrugged her shoulders, so the jacket squished. "No, this was a surprise . . . Stel gave it to me. She never gave me anything before."

"Stel, really? That really is a surprise. You mean to tell me that old witch actually has a heart?"

"I wouldn't go that far. But I was out there to see Grandpa Val, and Stel said she'd bought it for Lynette but Lynette didn't like it. So, Stel gave it to me."

"Did she really think she would like something with color in it? . . . that frickin' snob, out there in Fairfield. Let me tell you something about Lynnette. She doesn't even piss yellow. I know. I changed out of my bathing suit one time with her in Grandpa Val's pool house and the john door didn't lock."

Across the table, Lisa gave her Teri the sort of smile she used on the rare Saturday nights she waitressed at Bridgeport's Italian Heaven. A smile without eye-energy, but broad enough to show the caps she'd persuaded Val, her so-called father-in-law, to pay for.

Month by month, she'd watched her daughter deteriorate. First, her thick, brown hair exploding into a fright wig of split ends, then her skin growing blotchy and rough, and now, her cynicism, once bittersweet and fun like fizzy cider, as corrosive as battery acid. Everyone was either a bitch, an asshole, a goddamn bastard, a frickin' this, a frickin' that. If she didn't halt Teri's downward slide, a ghost-daughter would come home to her in Bridgeport. And that would mean she'd have two dependents, Teri, plus Teddy, Teri's little boy. She suddenly felt very old and tired.

"Grandpa Val's got a new physical therapist. This one seems to be doing him some good. He made it from his chair in the sunroom to the kitchen."

"Stel musta had a fit over that," Teri said. "After that last stroke, she probably had her bags packed and emptied out the bank accounts. Bet she and Lynette have a nice little place picked out in the Bahamas or wherever. Ditch Lynette's husband, that pathetic lump of shit, probably Lynette's kids, too, all of them waitin' for Grandpa Val to check out. But the old boy's still got game. Let me tell you, he's got game"

Teri looked around at the gray walls and suddenly bit her lip. A flood of hot pain reddened her skin's rough spots and her eyes brimmed with tears until Lisa's own eyes ached with her daughter's effort to blink them back—the guards didn't like prisoners crying: if they got upset they could get unruly. She watched Teri work to collect herself. Gradually, the emotion faded and she leaned back in her chair and smiled at Lisa. "Whew! Don't know where that came from."

But they both knew where. Her beloved and once-powerful grandfather, Val La Miastro, had lost so much control over southern Connecticut since his latest stroke that when his own granddaughter needed him to tip the scales of justice in her favor he didn't have the juice and she got three years for possession with intent to distribute.

"Stel's good for him," Lisa said.

Her daughter's smile relaxed, seemed less tentative. "So, you and Stel getting tight?"

"Come on. Grandpa Val's eighty-four, and Stel's seventy something. Who's going to take care of him if she doesn't?"

"It's just that she moved in so fast after Nonna Anne passed."

"It wasn't so fast. . . almost a year. Val and Stel, they operate on old-people time. If they don't do it today, then when?" She wished Teri wouldn't cling to her idealized version of her grandparents, still seeing her Grandpa Val and Nonna Anne as the doting pair who always lavished her with presents, a bike too big for her and Italian dolls when she was too old. And clothes, always something new from a little Fairfield or Westport shop. Teri loved those imagined grandparents, but Lisa wondered how she'd feel if she knew who they really were: Anne silent and cowed by Val who'd gone through at least five mistresses before settling on Stel three years before Anne got cancer.

Too many secrets. Teri was thirty-five; she was headstrong and foolish, but not dumb. She had to sense something was behind all those evasions and equivocations over the years. All those warning glances and long silences at dinners. The unanswered questions about her father. About her other grandparents. If she knew the truth, Lisa thought, maybe she'd see that there are no demons and no saints. And that she had only herself to thank for the mess she'd made of her life. And only herself to set it straight.

Down the line of tables, one of the prisoners started sobbing, and the two guards alerted like birddogs, their hands cupped over their guns. The room became charged with tension zapping off the other prisoners: if the sobbing woman didn't get a grip, their visiting hours would be terminated and there'd be hell to pay. The woman, still sobbing, pushed back her chair and walked blindly toward the gray metal door to the prison's interior. The guard posted by the door said something into his Walkie Talkie opened the door and closed it behind her while the woman's mother—Lisa assumed she was the sobbing woman's mother—stood staring, even when the door clicked soundly shut, she still stared as if she could see her daughter through the gray metal. The guard by the door on the visitors' side also said something into his Walkie Talkie, and a third guard came into the room as the mother, a large black woman in a Bridgeport Bluefish windbreaker, shuffled out.

When she was gone, a sense of absence and odd collective guilt replaced the tension. Across the table, Teri was studying the cement floor, as if she had no right to look her own mother in the eye.

To Lisa, her daughter's avoidance was an expression of despair, and they hadn't even talked about Teddy. The boy was the most important thing in Teri's life, but being away from

him, knowing her incarceration had wounded her quiet son had also made him the most painful subject to talk about.

Teri looked up. “Time’s getting short, Mom. You didn’t tell me how Teddy did this summer.”

Lisa settled back. A relief—they were thinking each other’s thoughts, just like they had when they snuggled on cast-off green couch from Nonna Anne and watched “Reading Rainbow” together.

“At this very moment, he’s supposed to be writing a book report on some book about lost treasure . . . I don’t remember the title. I left him with a note reminding him, so he better have it done by the time I get home. He’s supposed to go over to Mrs. Aroyo’s.”

“He giving you a hard time, Mom?”

“Teddy? When has Teddy ever given me or anyone else a hard time? But you know how he is . . . he lets things slide.”

“They’ll pass him to fifth grade, won’t they?”

“Oh, sure . . . this book report, it’s just something a little extra. Sister Mary Ambrose says his math’s improved a whole grade. She thinks maybe he gets overwhelmed during the regular year. He’s so quiet, it’s like he goes into himself and daydreams, then he doesn’t do the work. But in summer school the classes are smaller; it’s more relaxed. Plus, there’s nowhere to hide.”

“Every year it’s the same thing with him, since first grade. He starts off okay, then falls behind. Then he catches up in summer school. I’m beginning to think he likes going to summer school. Other kids like hanging out, going to the beach. But my Teddy? What’s he like? Summer school! What kind of a kid likes summer school?”

“That’s not the only thing he likes. Look at this.” Lisa glanced at the guard who nodded, then she slipped her hand into the pocket of her slacks and took out small piece of paper covered with small squares. In each was a number ranging from four to thirteen. The guard came over, looked at it and handed it to Teri.

“What’s this, Mom?”

“A scorecard.”

“I kinda guessed that. But for what?”

“Golf. Nino’s teaching Teddy to play golf.”

“Golf!”

“Yeah, one Sunday he and Nino were watching some tournament and Teddy really got into it. So, the next week, Nino came over, and said ‘Come on, let’s go.’ Just like that and took him to a driving range in Milford. Now, they play, maybe every other week.”

“Nino takes him?”

“Yeah, you know how Nino’s always loved golf. He’s played all over . . . Sarasota, Cleveland, some island off Georgia. ”

“You don’t go with them, Mom?”

“Me? Why would I go?”

“To play, Mom. To have some fun.”

“It’s a guy thing. Teddy needs to do guy things with a guy, not his grandmother.”

Teri slung an arm over the back of her chair, a little mischief brightening her eyes. “And you really believe Nino’s playing golf with Teddy because he wants to do guy things with a ten-year-old?”

“Give it a rest, Teri. It’s not like that with Nino and me. It never has been.”

"Then what is it, Mom? I mean all these years, ever since Daddy was killed, it's been Nino, Nino, Nino. All the time Nino. So if it's not like that with you and him, then what is it?"

Lisa reached for the scorecard, carefully folded it and put it back into her slacks. She needed time, needed to weigh how much information to give her daughter and the possible consequences.

"There are a lot of things I haven't told you. Things about your father. About myself. Even things about your Grandfather Val."

Teri leaned across the table.

Lisa glanced at her watch . . . if she dragged this out just a little bit longer, time would save her. She started with the things they both knew, but dreamily, as if she needed to revisit those bittersweet early years for her own sake: The third-floor flat in Bridgeport that Grandpa Val found for her and Johnnie after their honeymoon in the Adirondacks; how happy they'd been; what a beautiful little girl Teri had been; the horrible Sunday her father smashed his boat into the bridge pilings at Pleasure Beach; how hard things were after that.

"Mom, what's all this got to do with Nino?"

She had a nugget she wanted to slip her daughter, a little bit of what really had happened to her father that day on Pleasure Beach, how Nino had been complicit in her father's fatal crash, but that might mean she'd have to give up the rest—how Nino hadn't acted alone, so she kept droning on about how they all loved Pleasure Beach. And then she slipped up: she mentioned Nino being at the beach the day of the accident.

"But Nino wasn't there, Mom."

"You were only five, Teri. Your memories weren't what they call 'integrated'." She smiled. "Coping with a kid like Teddy, you get pretty good at psychobabble."

But Teri wasn't buying it. "Nino wasn't there, Mom. I remember."

And then the door on the prisoners' side opened and three more guards came in just like they always did when visiting hours were over. The one who positioned himself directly behind Teri stood with his feet apart and his elbow cocked so his hand hung loose and ready near his sidearm. He looked hard at Lisa. She hated leaving Teri clinging to a false memory, but there was nothing she could do: the guard's cold eyes told her that. She knew enough about Val's business to know he had eyes everywhere, even in prison.

And then Teri's eyes told her what they both knew: keep quiet. Nino was Val's man. Anything they said about him, even if it was good, could get back to Val.

Around them chairs were screeching as they were slid back over the concrete floor. Lisa stood up. "Hey, until I see you again, try to learn what you can about golf. That way, if Teddy writes to you about it, you'll know what he's talking about."

She watched the light fading in her daughter's eyes. Then Teri said what she did every month: "Tell him I love him, Mom. Tell him for me."

But Lisa was already tying the belt of her safari jacket. She might be wrong, but she thought that guard looked at her especially intensely this month.

On the bus, she sat by the window and watched the little Connecticut towns roll by through the gray rain—South Lyme, Old Lyme, Old Saybrook. They were making good time until just outside of New Haven, where the bus had to detour around a half-completed bridge. The span ended in midair like the flight path of a bird that's been shot. Saturday and no actual construction was going on, but a few workers in yellow safety helmets and windbreakers stood around a smoky fire in a rusty barrel. Amid a chaotic jumble of Jersey walls, dump trucks and

cement mixers, the only orderly thing was the blue line of Porta Potties close to a construction trailer balanced on cinderblocks. Lisa saw its door suddenly open.

A short man jammed his helmet on and headed for the barrel, every step broadcasting frustration that his short legs couldn't carry him faster. Lisa knew him. At least, his type. The type who could sing "Volare," even the verses in Italian. Who kept three pairs of clean socks in his bottom desk drawer and a pencil with a retractable point with a little Gianni Brothers pad in his breast pocket of his shirt. And a gun his kids weren't supposed to know about in a shoe box on his closet shelf.

He would have a good enough intellect, but a towering impatience. She'd bet that anything could set off his fury—those guys by the barrel were going to catch hell.

And she knew, too, that he was not as smart as he thought he was. Who pulled the strings, let out the major contracts, got the money passed under the table for a bid—this was a man who thought he knew the players, but she was sure he was only a bantam strutting among major cocks who'd peck out his eye anytime they wanted to. Watching him, Lisa felt she was watching her past strut through the rain.

Her phone rang. "Grandma? Uncle Nino's here. He wants me to pack a suitcase, but I don't know what to put in it."

"A suitcase? What are you talking about, Teddy?"

"Uncle Nino wants me to pack a suitcase. He says I should put in a sweater, but I don't like sweaters. They itch."

"A suitcase for what? Where's he taking you?"

"I don't know . . . he says we're going to go fishing. Should I pack a bathing suit, too?"

"Let me talk to Nino, Teddy. You've got another week of summer school. You can't just go skipping off someplace."

She heard her grandson saying something, then Nino was on the line. "Where are you?"

"What do you mean, where am I? I'm on the bus, where did you think?"

"But where is it?"

"Outside New Haven. Why?"

"Mr. Val wants to see you."

"Nino, what's all this stuff about Teddy needing a suitcase?"

"I can't say . . . Just that Mr. Val wants to see you. And you need to pack, too."

"To pack? What for? Where are we going?"

"I can't say. Mr. Val'll tell you when you get here. I'll pick you up."

The bus started again. They'd be in Bridgeport in twenty-five minutes. "What's happening, Nino? Please, you've got to tell me"

"All I know is that I got a call from Mr. Val. He says you and Teddy should get packed."

She'd always thought Nino was her ally, but she could tell from his tone that at the moment, he was what he'd always been: her so-called father-in-law's foot soldier.

"Nino?"

"What?"

"How long is this for? . . . Teddy's got summer school, and then regular school starts. I was going to see if he could be an altar boy."

"I can't tell you that. Could be nothing . . . Mr. Val, you know how he's been. Maybe just some idea he got, and will be out of his head by the time you get here."

Nino's lie was so thin, she could see right through it to the long, dark road stretching into a clouded horizon, the same dark road she'd been on ever since meeting Johnny DiNardo forty-three years earlier. Now maybe she was going to find out where it ended.